

San Bruno officials praised for poise, effectiveness under pressure

When a gas line exploded into a towering inferno, the city manager, mayor, police and fire chief mobilized swiftly to get residents out and soothe the community's grief and fear.

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Reporting from San Bruno, Calif. — San Bruno Mayor Jim Ruane started his day with a double funeral, helping lay to rest a mother and her daughter killed by the explosion and fire that tore through a hilly neighborhood eight days earlier. He would end the day with an evening vigil for a third victim, cut down in her youth.

In the afternoon, the stocky grandfather with a soothing voice met with more than 100 men and women who had lost everything in the Sept. 9 disaster that focused worldwide attention on this working-class city between the glitz of San Francisco and the wealth of Silicon Valley.

"It's been very tough as a city," he told the crowd assembled Friday. "If you need help, we're here. If you need someone to talk to, we're here. We have the resources in place, and we're ready to hold your hand — hold your hand, one by one."

Ruane, a plaster and drywall contractor who calls himself "the proud mayor of a wonderful city," is as unassuming as his hometown, which he describes as a slice of "American pie." In the frantic days since the explosion, which killed at least four people and destroyed 37 homes, he has overseen the city's response to a disaster whose damage is estimated at \$65.4 million — more than twice San Bruno's general fund.

He has described his plain city of about 44,000 that neatly preserves '50s architecture and small-town values to media outlets throughout the country. And he has reassured shattered residents that San Bruno would recover, and so would they.

"His calmness calmed the town," said Carol Bonner, the city clerk who has known Ruane for years and lives six blocks from his ranch house. "He's a very sincere, caring person, and he's very detail-oriented."

Ruane makes \$486 a month as part-time mayor and doesn't even have an office in the boxy City Hall, built in 1953. He has been backed throughout the crisis by equally unflashy officials who performed with steadiness under extraordinary pressure.

Among them were City Manager Connie Jackson, whose previous experience was in cities even smaller than this one; Police Chief Neil Telford, who joined the force as a volunteer officer in 1982 and never left; Fire Chief Dennis Haag, an affable 31-year veteran who speaks so softly he is hard to hear; and Marshall Wilson, the dapper spokesman for San Mateo County.

Ruane had just left a Chamber of Commerce event when he spotted flames geysering above the hills. He drove straight to the disaster and did not sleep for more than 60 hours. The worst part, he said, was how helpless he felt watching homes burn for nearly two hours before the 30-inch-diameter gas line was shut down. "There was nothing we could do," he said.

Jackson was in her City Hall office when she heard the booms. She launched an emergency operations center and made a long series of nuts-and-bolts decisions over the next week. She sees no end to the disaster's impact. "While we've been actively working towards getting back to something that resembles normal," she told the City Council, "it goes without saying that operations of our city and our community will never be normal again."

Telford was at police headquarters when the phones began to ring and ring. He pitched in to answer until he realized the magnitude of the blaze, went to the scene and helped evacuate residents. Wilson was driving on U.S. 101 when he saw flames, detoured to San Bruno City Hall and was enlisted as the city's media contact.

City officials and the county's mutual aid system, which sent 200 firefighters and 200 law enforcement officers to the scene, have been praised for their response. Jackie Speier, the area's congresswoman, called it a "textbook example." Lt. Gov. Abel Maldonado, filling in while Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger was in Asia, flew in six hours after the blast, stayed for two days and stepped in as a Spanish interpreter. "I thought they performed very, very well," he said of city officials.

Of course, there were glitches. Officials at times offered contradictory numbers for the dead and missing. Telford declared the disaster site a crime scene and barred the media.

Some residents with undamaged homes complained about long delays before they were allowed back. Others whose homes were incinerated were upset that they could not visit the ruins for days. But many praised the assistance center that the city had quickly set up and the accessibility of San Bruno officials.

"They're being great so far," said Jerry Guernsey, who found only coins in the debris that was his house. "Everyone is helping as much as they can."

Two days after the explosion, Ruane organized a town hall meeting at his parish, St. Robert's Catholic Church, the largest assembly room in the small city. More than 650 people jammed the pews, choir loft, side aisles and lobby to hear the mayor, Jackson, Haag and Telford.

When an audience member swore at a Pacific Gas & Electric Co. official who said security concerns prevented him from providing maps of gas pipelines, Ruane insisted on decorum. "This city has been through enough grief," he said, triggering sustained applause.

When a resident later shouted a comment about the age of PG&E's pipeline, Ruane said evenly: "All right. All right. We're going forward." There were no more outbursts.

By Friday, anger seemed to have given way to resignation. Tense residents gathered in a vaulted city gym to hear about their demolition options. Ruane made a single request before the long question-and-answer session began: "I want you to do one thing for me right now, if you will. Indulge me: Take a deep breath."

Bob Hensel, a retired firefighter who lost his home, first scrawled a question for local officials. Then he wrote down his personal goal: "I'm going to be the first person to move back in, with the city help, of course. The faster I can move forward, the less I think of the past."

He handed the slip of paper to the mayor, who read it silently. Ruane smiled, flashed a thumbs up. He paused a moment, walked over to the older man, shook his hand.

Then Ruane hugged him.

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